

# Easter Island or (Man-) Eaters Island?

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## Introduction

This paper arose in part from my own interest in the persistent popularity of the phenomenon of cannibalism as an explanation in *Archaeology* (e.g. see Bahn 1990; 1991; 1992), and in part from Steven Fischer's report in the invaluable *Rapa Nui Journal* (1992) of an alleged visit to Easter Island by a French vessel in 1845. In what must be one of the most ridiculous yarns ever spun about the island, it was claimed that the crew was attacked by cannibals, and "Mr Ollivier . . . had, on various parts of his body, the teeth marks of those cruel islanders, who had begun to eat him alive."

This led me to wonder what, if any, hard evidence lies behind the claim, found throughout the literature on Easter Island, that its occupants were cannibals at some point in their history.

## The Phenomenon of Cannibalism

Cannibalism fascinates people. The image of one human being eating another is compelling, and the huge black cooking pot of countless movies and cartoons has firmly planted the idea in most people's minds. But in 1979 the unquestioning acceptance of the existence of this phenomenon was shattered by a publication (Arens 1979) which revealed that there is almost no reliable evidence in history or ethnography for the custom of cannibalism.

No one disputes the existence of cannibalism by the mentally deranged, as in the recent case of Jeffrey Dahmer, or cannibalism caused by catastrophe, sheer necessity and starvation, as in the Andean plane crash. Such aberrations must have occurred sporadically throughout human history. But Arens was unable to unearth any evidence for cannibalism as a *custom* in any society at any time; all he could find were second-hand accounts and lots of hearsay. Nevertheless, almost every people on Earth stands accused of the practice at some point in its history. The Roman historian Strabo said the Irish were man-eaters, and in the 18th century Gibbon claimed the same of the pre-Christian Scots and Picts. In the 16th century the Spanish thought the Aztecs were cannibals, and the Aztecs held the same view of their conquerors. Cannibalism is essentially a term of abuse, and accusations are normally leveled at enemies, neighbors or "inferiors" to show how "primitive" or subhuman they are. The word was coined by Columbus who adapted it from the name of the Carib people of the Caribbean.

Even supposedly well-documented examples such as the *kuru* sickness of New Guinea, allegedly caused by ingesting human tissue, are more simply explained through germs entering the bloodstream when natives with cuts or open sores handle the decaying flesh and brains of the dead in their complex secondary funerary rituals. One cannot, of course, rule custom cannibalism out of the human experience altogether, but Arens' work, together with the debunking in recent years of many archaeological examples (especially concerning Neanderthal remains -see Bahn 1990, 1991), suggests

strongly that it has always been an extraordinarily rare and exceptional behavior for humans to indulge in. Even if there are one or two apparently reliable first-hand-witness accounts of cannibalism in the Pacific (C. Love, pers. comm.), this tells us nothing about its likelihood or its occurrence on Easter Island.

## The Rapanui Evidence

"Look here, these dirty bastards have been sitting eating each other and spitting the teeth on the floor." Bill Mulloy.

The most dramatic claim for cannibalism on Easter Island is this (doubtless tongue-in-cheek) utterance by Mulloy, cited by Heyerdahl (1958:73), at the time Mulloy was working in a cave on the island, and had a bag beside him full of burnt human bones. Even the most fervent proponent of anthropophagy's existence, however, would surely draw the line at cannibals crunching up human jaw bones and spitting out the teeth!

A search of the Easter Island literature for "hard evidence" of cannibalism produced only a handful of quotes. The first, in Smith's (1961:264) account of excavations at Puapau Cave, that "the occurrence of fragments of human bone suggest cannibalism"—to me, it also suggests a host of other more mundane explanations—and from Lee (1992:169) the remark that at Ahu Nau Nau "human bones with cut marks . . . are evidence of cannibalism"—once again, that may be so, but they may equally be evidence of other things. Most recently, Cervellino (1993:53) has argued that, in the subsistence of occupants of Ana Kai Tangata, "se debe incluir la carne humana. Asi lo demuestran los innumerables huesos calcinados de diferentes partes del cuerpo humano, que dicen relación con la antropofagia vivida en la isla"—in this case too, the simple presence of burnt bits of human bone is sufficient to conjure up cannibalism (influenced no doubt by the legends linked to the cave's name—see below), despite the prevalence of cremation on the island for centuries!

Apart from these claims, the case for Easter Island cannibalism rests *entirely* on oral traditions, some patently ridiculous and others more plausible. The early missionaries were the first to mention the phenomenon—the cynic would say that t'was ever thus, and missionaries around the world often stressed such claims as a means of justifying their own presence. It is certainly noteworthy that none of the early European visitors *before* the missionaries ever alluded to the practice. Be that as it may, Roussel wrote (Métraux 1940:150) that cannibalism was abandoned only after the introduction of Christianity, and before that natives had eaten some white men, including two Peruvian slavers. "Cannibalistic meals were eaten by warriors in a secluded spot, and women and children were rarely admitted to such feasts." Zumbohm was told by natives that the fingers and toes were the most palatable bits: Métraux (ibid.:330) seems

to consider such tales as "direct evidence that the corpses of victims were eaten."

Palmer repeated Roussel's claim that the last cannibal feasts occurred in 1863-4 when some Spaniards were eaten (Heyerdahl 1961:73) and inferred "from visible remains and native testimony" that human sacrifice took place, probably in honor of Makemake—needless to say, human sacrifice is by no means the same thing as cannibalism.

According to Geiseler (ibid.: 82), the oldest people recalled that prisoners of war, when caught in large numbers, were kept and fed in special houses in front of *ahu*, and later eaten in honor of gods, at feasts. In 1890 (ibid.:88), an American traveler, V.S. Frank, reported some previously unrecorded memories of the last cannibal ceremonies in which "the oldest of the still living men had actually participated"—the victims were said to be local captives and certain Peruvian sailors, and were eaten in front of some still standing statue.

Thomson reported (1891:529-31) that cannibalism began on the island when hostilities arose between families or clans, and that (ibid.:511-12) it was practiced down to the advent of the first missionaries, and was always an important feature of the ancient feasts. "The bodies were roasted in ovens made of hot stones covered with earth . . . and certain portions were awarded to prominent individuals."

What credence can be attached to such tales? First, it must be remembered that all of them were gathered after the terrible slave-raid of 1862/3 which reduced the island's population to just over 100 people and must have caused an intense hatred of Peruvians. Second, as Routledge stressed (1917:332), "The Polynesians are . . . notoriously inexact in their statements. They frequently do not themselves know when they are speaking the truth and when they are relying on imagination"; and (1919:211-2), it was even more difficult to collect facts from brains than out of stones . . . it is particularly difficult to arrive at the truth from the untutored mind . . . when meaning was a little vague, there was a constant tendency to glide from what was remembered to what was imagined." Routledge sensibly concluded (ibid.:277) that the legends "cannot be regarded as more than suggestive."

This is no doubt true in the case of stories such as a man being given a thousand men to cook, taking thousands of children by the leg and dashing them against a stone, and—in the absence of fire—cooking the human flesh in armpits (ibid.:285-7).

Perhaps the most important statement from Routledge (ibid.:225) is that while legends record how many people were eaten after each affray, all living persons deny, with rather striking unanimity, not only that they themselves have ever been cannibals, but that their fathers were so. If this is correct, the custom was dying out for some reason before the advent of Christianity, their grandfathers, the old people admit, ate human flesh, but, if there were any rites connected with it, they 'did not tell'.

Routledge was shown the remains of 'Ko Tori,' the last man on the island who had eaten human flesh (ibid.:226), and noted that his jaw was toothless—which implies that he, at least, could not have left tooth marks on anyone, though he might have given them a nasty suck.

One wonders if this was the man of whom Victoria

Rapahango told Métraux (1940: 150) that, when little, she had known the last cannibal of the island, and all the children were much afraid of him. In an echo of Routledge's report, Métraux says that "no native on the island denied that his ancestors were cannibals. Some laughed at it" others resented any allusion to such a savage custom. Most of the islanders lost their self-consciousness about cannibalism after hearing of some instances of it in Europe. "This sounds like a classic case of attributing cannibalism to others: in most cultures, as mentioned above, it is a insulting and degrading practice normally ascribed to one's enemies or neighbors. Since the islanders had no neighbors, they might at most accept that their pre-Christian forebears had indulged in it, but clearly all contemporary islanders denied the practice.

Both Métraux and Routledge were told that the *matatoa* (warriors) who used to gather at Mataveri both before and after the principal feast at 'Orongo were then more prone than at any other time to indulge in human flesh (Routledge 1919:259; Métraux 1940: 334), and there were legends (ibid.:151) of adults and children being slaughtered during peacetime by warriors craving human flesh.

Much attention has been focused over the years on the cave, near Mataveri, called Ana Kai Tangata or "Eat Man Cave," where feasts were said to have been held in association with the birdman festival. However, as Lee has pointed out (1992:187), the name could equally mean "cave where men eat" or "cave that eats men," while Fischer (1992) speculates that it could also denote the inherited name of a legendary East Polynesian chief, Kai Tangata.

## Conclusion

Despite the unreliable nature of most of these tales, it remains true that Easter Island's traditional history frequently alludes to cannibalism, and to some individuals murdering to satisfy their appetites (Métraux 1940:151). If it did exist on the island, when and why might it have arisen? Englert (1970:131) emphasizes that tradition affirms it did not exist in Hotu Matua's time, but—at least by the time of the troubles—it had been adopted by various families among the *Hanau momoko*. If the practice appeared—or greatly increased—at this time, it can, as Englert speculates, be attributed to a crisis-- the prizing of human flesh as food implies that the people had little other mammalian flesh available, and that cannibalism is directly attributable to food shortage (ibid.:141). In other words, this would fit with the scenario of environmental disaster, overpopulation and starvation deduced from the island's palynological and archaeological record (Bahn & Flenley 1992), with the "starvation features" of the *moai kavakava* statuettes displaying clear familiarity with some results of acute food shortage.

In short, despite the lack of any hard evidence, one can entertain the possibility that "there is no smoke without fire" and that the abundance of cannibalism tales on Easter Island does suggest the existence of the practice at some point in the island's history. In view of the extreme rarity of custom cannibalism in the global archaeological and ethnographic record, and of what can be deduced concerning Easter Island's drastic environmental destruction, it is a fair bet that cannibalism -- if it ever existed on the island -- was a freakish event, a

short-lived result of desperation, violence and starvation.

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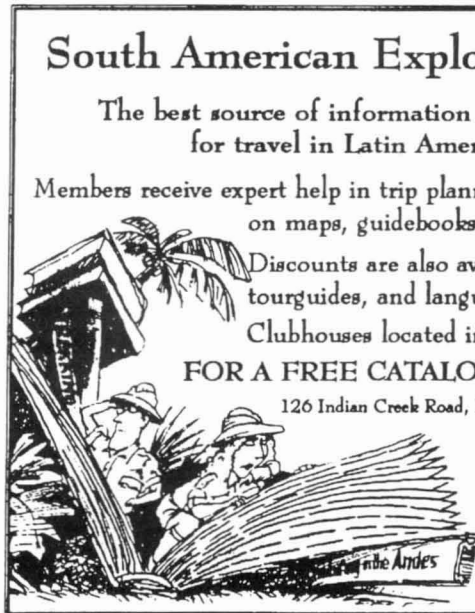
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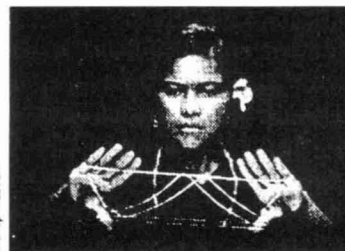
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